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BROWNIES IN THEIR HOME LAND

BY JAMES MAIN DIXON

During the past twenty-five years the Brownies have become domesticated in American homes, and no term is more familiar in our households and in our general conversation. Indeed, the very mention of a "brownie" is oddly bright and vivid. And yet none of our parents knew of these quaint creatures, except such as came from the northern part of the British Isles, which are, or were, haunted by brownies from Johnny Groats to the Solway Firth.

Brownies belong to Fairyland and come under the general term "fairy," and yet they are to be distinguished from ordinary fairies. These other ethereal beings were mostly freakish, mischievous or spiteful, but the brownies, while easily offended, were hard-working little folks who liked nothing better than to do a good turn for people. There is a plodding seriousness in the brownie that make him the friend of the humble cottager and his wife, whose labors he loved to lighten.

Readers of Scott will remember that a reference is made in "Rob Roy" to a race of beings whom it was thought well for people to conciliate, because of their power to aid or harm. When Osbaldistone was traveling with Bailie Nicol Jarvie in the Highland country north of Glasgow, the good magistrate, who had Highland blood in his veins, and was superstitious, expressed his awe of these beings. "If I could trust the tale of my companion," remarks Osbaldistone, "which, while he professed to believe every word of it, he told under his breath, and with an air of something like intimidation, this hill so regularly formed, so richly verdant, and garlanded with such a beautiful variety of ancient trees and thriving copsewood, was held by the neighborhood to contain within its unseen caverns the palaces of the fairies, a race of airy beings who formed an intermediate class between men and demons, and who, if not positively malignant to humanity, were yet to be avoided and feared on account of their capricious, vindictive and irritable disposition." "They call them," said Mr. Jarvie, in a whisper, "Daoine Schie, which signifies, as I understand, men of peace; meaning thereby to make their good-will. And we may e'en as well call them that too, Mr. Osbaldistone. for there's no good in speaking ill of the laird within his own bounds."

The fairies are generally feminine, while the brownies, gnomes, or "men of peace," are masculine. They are supposed to eat and

drink like human beings, and to be fond of the crumbs that fall from the table, which they come and gather when all is still. Old people in the Highlands of Scotland dislike to see crumbs of bread or drops of milk removed from the floor after meals, "for," say they, "let them be, let them be, many are the needy mouths awaiting them." On one occasion, says Mr. E. C. Watson in a recent discussion of Highland mythology, the tenant of Staoligearry was losing his cattle through mischance. As he sat on a rock musing over his losses, he heard a gnome mother singing to her boy:

"Hush, thou dearie, hush, thou pet,
Hush, thou darling of the rapid feet,
When Macmhuirich's board is set.
My darling will get corn and cream."

Macmhuirich then went home, and though he never entered his kitchen before, he went on that day. His baking woman was making bread, and bits of dough and grains of meal were falling from her in the process. She took no notice of these till a piece fell from the bannock on her palm, and then she stooped down and lifted it. Noticing the act, Macmhuirich went over and tapped her on the head with a switch, remarking, "Leave it alone, maiden, many a needful mouth is waiting for it. And as long as thou shalt stand in my house never again remove the fragments of food from the floor, for they belong of right to the gnomes of the rocks. And as long as Macmhuirich lived he went daily to the knoll with an offering of crumbs of bread and drops of milk; nor ever again did he lose any of his cattle or horses or sheep.

The quaint people, while friendly to the native inhabitants of a glen, disliked strangers, and travelers were expected to sing a propitiatory song before entering the glen. The gnomes liked to be flattered, and were easily propitiated. Often they floated around like midges, and would quickly gather or disperse according to their whims.

It is now usual for scholars to refer all such stories to the continued existence, among the Celtic inhabitants of North Britain, of a race of Finnish people, Svartalfer; small and dark, who occupied underground dwellings. Their skins were tawny, their locks were brown, and they wore a brown mantle reaching to the knee, as well as a hood of brown. Their favorite haunts were hollowed trees, dismantled castles, caves and *correis*—i. e., hollows in a hill. Partly men and partly beings of another world, they made voyages in the air, emitting music of various sorts. Sometimes it sounded like the silvery tones of a harp; sometimes like the grinding of a mill; sometimes it resembled the crowing of a cock. Although naturally indolent, they could busy themselves on occasion, and discharge ac-

tive and useful labors like Robin Goodfellow. Their favorite time for working was at night; and they liked to be let alone. Nor would they accept any recompense; indeed, they gave up their labors when thanks were offered. They were fond of devoting themselves to some particular family, and would continue faithful as long as their susceptibilities were not hurt. On one occasion a brownie undertook to gather the sheep into the bight or fold by an early hour, and he worked so diligently at the task that he had every single sheep on the hill within the enclosure, and a number of hares as well! When congratulated on his success, he exclaimed: "Confound these wee gray ones; they cost me more trouble than all the rest of them."

Stories of brownies can be gathered from Johnnie Groats and the Orkneys to the Mull of Galloway. When working together they were quite jealous of one another. The blacksmith of Glammis in Perthshire was helped at night by two brownies who worked at his forge. One of the brownies wore a red cowl, the other wore a blue. In the morning on entering the smithy he was so pleased with their activity that he exclaimed:

"Weel chappit (well struck) Red Cloak;
But better chappit Blue."

Whereupon they answered saucily:

"Chap wha we like to,
We'll chap nae mair to you;"

and disappeared, never to return.

Alexander Laing in his ballad, "The Brownie of Fearnden," tells the story of a serviceable gnome, who was worth a troop of servants to a farmer on Norinside:

He had ane servant dwelling near,
Worth all his maids and men;
And who was this if ye would speir (ask)?
The Brownie of Fearnden.

When there was corn to thresh or diglit (clean),
Or barn or byre to clean,
He had ane busy hour at night,
Atween the twal and ane;

And though the snow was never sa deep,
And never sa wet the rain,
He ran an errand in a whip,
The Brownie of Fearnden.

It chanced that the goodwife of the house was in the pangs of

labor and urgently needed the services of a midwife; but the night was dark and stormy, and not one of the nine or ten servants would venture down the glen; for they feared the capricious brownie. Meanwhile he heard the commotion and determined to aid the good woman in her extremity; so

He off and mounted the riding mare,
And through the wind and rain;
And soon was at the skilly wife's,
Who lived over the den.

Rousing the woman, he told her to get ready without delay, as her services were needed:

"O rise! O rise! and hap you well
To keep you from the rain."
"Where do they want me?" quoth the wife,
"If we be near the den."

When both were mounted on the mare,
And riding up the glen;
"O wot ye, laddie," quoth the wife,
"If we be near the den?"

"Are we come near the den?" she said,
"Just whisht, ye fool," quoth he,
"For worse than ye have in your arms
This night ye will not see."

They soon were landed at the door,
The wife he handed down—
"I've left the house but one half-hour,—
I am a clever loon!"

His companion, glancing at his broad feet and mysterious eyes, began to question him, but he cut her short, telling her to

"Mind the wife, and mind the wean,
And see that all goes right;
'And I will take you home again
Before the morning light.

"And if they speir (ask) who brought you here,
Cause they were scant of men—
Even tell them that you rode behind
The Brownie of Fearnden."

Many of the words in this ballad of Mr. Laing's are rendered into the standard forms, so as not to perplex readers. Another old

ballad which deals with the Brownies is "Niken Drum."

The remarkable accomplishments of industrious neighbors, which were a matter of some envy to the lazier inhabitants, were often conveniently credited to the work of the ubiquitous brownies. This was the case at least in the Western isles, among the cotters of the Hebrides.

The brownies were known and appreciated, also, as far south as the English border. For three centuries a brownie had served faithfully the family of Leithen Hall in Dumfriesshire. It happened the laird died when the next heir was abroad and that a time elapsed before the latter came to claim his own. Soon after his arrival, the family brownie came and proffered his services. As he seemed rough and uncouth, the new master ordered for him a suit of clothes. This was taken as a piece of officiousness by the over-sensitive brownie, and he left the place in displeasure, exclaiming as he departed:

Ca', cuttie, ca'!
All the luck of Leithen Ha'
Gangs wi' me to Brodbeck Ha'!

In a few years the prophecy came true. Leithen Hall was reduced to a ruin, and Brodbeck Hall began to flourish.

Further back on the English border there was a brownie called the "Cowie," who was attached to the Elliots of Gowanberry Tower in Roxburghshire. Between sunset and sunrise he would carry in the peats, smear the sheep, and stack the cut grain. He might also be overheard in the Tower as he busily chopped or sawed the wood, turned the quern, or spun at the wheel. When his voice was heard in the tones of lamentation, a death might be expected in the family. The last of the Gowanberry Elliots, Adam by name, in returning home, fell from his horse as he crossed a stream and, although he was able to drag himself out of the water, yet he died in a neighboring churchyard. For some days before his death the voice of the Cowie had come wailing to the Tower, and on the fatal night it rose to a shriek. Then he left the place forever.

In the far-off isles of Orkney, where the winter nights are so long and the summer nights so short, the brownies used to be much in evidence. Very few families, indeed, were without a household brownie, who helped with the household chores, and received offerings of milk or ale. Milk was sprinkled at every corner and ale was poured into a hollowed stone, which got the name of the "Brownie's stone." In harvesting they had stacks known as "brownie's stacks," which were not put up in the usual fashion, but resisted the storm and would not turn over. Near Noltland Castle, once the residence of the Balfours of Westray Island, there lived a brownie

who was devoted to the Balfour family. Later when the castle was abandoned, the brownie and his friends celebrated births and marriages in the family by a kind of spectral illumination.

In Wilson's "Tales of the Borders," which have fascinated so many, young and old, interested in legend and romance, the brownies are called "men of peace." Marion Comrie, the heroine of "The Outlaw, or the Maiden of Lednick," lived in west Perthshire, not far from the sources of the Fay River. In her neighborhood was a famous pool, called in Gaelic "The Devil's Cauldron." It lay in a picturesque hollow below a cataract, and beside it the "brownies," elves or "men of peace," used to keep their revels. These *daona shigh* lived in the adjoining caverns, and had to be propitiated by visitors who intruded upon their domains.

How came the brownie culture to take root in this side of the Atlantic? It happened in this wise. One of the many Scottish settlements in Canada is to be found at Granby, near Quebec. During the long winter evenings the old people of the place loved to relate the legends and traditions of the gray mother country to the young folks. Among them was a boy called Palmer Cox, upon whom these *juskals*, or tales of elf-land, made a great impression. He left his home when a lad of seventeen, and finally drifted from the East to California, where he had a desk in a railroad office in San Francisco. Always fond of art, he gave up business to engage in its pursuit, but failed to make a living; and then he wrote for the newspapers and the monthly magazines. While in San Francisco he was a member of the famous sketching club, in which Benoni Irwin was a leader.

His literary and art work made a good blend, and he was encouraged to go East and find a wider market for his talents. His animal pictures and descriptions found favor with the leaders of *Little Folks*, *Wide Awake* and *St. Nicholas*, but yet he felt that he had not yet realized his possibilities. It was only when the memory of the brownie stories came to him, as by an inspiration, that he felt satisfied. From the beginning the brownie stories and illustrations were a marked success, and soon the little creatures had the national reputation they enjoy today.